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KARIN WIMMER (MÜNCHEN)

»From Automatic Drawing to American Abstract Art: André Masson, Jackson Pollock and Cy Twombly«

This paper will show the connection between Surrealism and American Abstract Art, citing in particular the works of André Masson, Jackson Pollock and Cy Twombly. During the crucial years 1938-1947, a cultural transfer took place when the greater part of the European Surrealist group was transplanted to New York. Masson came to the United States in June 1941, living first with his family in Washington and later on a farm in New Preston, Connecticut. During his exile Masson was extremely productive. Between 1941 and 1945 he created more than 100 paintings, 50 graphic works and about one dozen sculptures, together with a large number of drawings, watercolors and pastels. In New York, the Atelier 17 of Stanley William Hayter became an important connection point between the surrealists and American abstract artists. Masson and Pollock both worked there. Pollock's works show a significant affinity with the works of André Masson. This paper will discuss the influence of automatic drawing on the American abstract artists. Jackson Pollock's work *Number 32* of 1950 shows, for example, the radical change in abstract painting after World War II. This work is a rare large example of the classic >drip painting< which Pollock made between the years 1947 and 1950. Pollock worked with the >gob process<, in which the flow of paint can be controlled through the consistency and the quantity of the absorbed pigments, but mainly through rapid hand and arm motions. Without direct contact between painting utensils and image, the artist's medium has an important role to play in the creative process. >Drip painting< should be understood as a rejection of traditional painting. The surrealist tradition of automatism played an important role not only for Jackson Pollock, but also for Cy Twombly. To him, the motions of drawing came spontaneously, almost automatically, powered by feelings. Inwardly moving themes can be released and restrained with the help of the hand and body. As with Pollock's >action paintings<, speed and body movement came to the fore.

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Jackson Pollock's work *Number 32* of 1950 shows, for example, the radical change in abstract painting after World War II.



Abb. 1: Jackson Pollock, Number 32, 1950

This work is a rare large example of the classic >drip painting<, which Pollock made between the years 1947 and 1950. Pollock worked with the >gob process<, in which the flow of paint can be controlled partly through the consistency and the quantity of the absorbed pigments, but mainly through rapid hand and arm motions. Without direct contact between painting utensils and image, the artist's medium has an important role to play in the creative process. >Drip painting< should be understood as a rejection of traditional painting. The surrealist tradition of automatism played an important role for Jackson Pollock.¹



Abb. 2: Jackson Pollock, Echo (Number 25), 1951

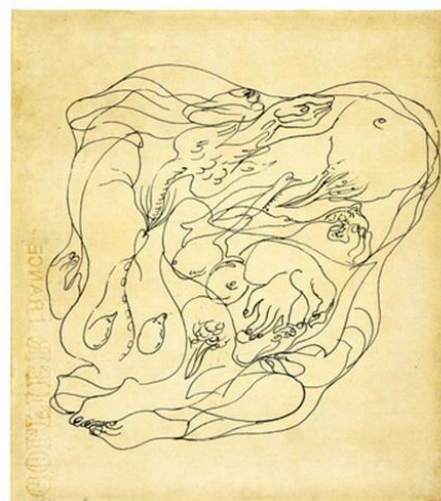


Abb. 3: André Masson, Automatic Drawing, 1924 © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015

<2>

Pollock's work *Echo* shows biomorphic forms and evokes associations to figurative shapes. In part, Pollock returns to the color black its linear function. With this work Pollock moves closer to surrealism, in particular the work reminds us of André Masson.



Abb. 4: Les champs magnétiques, écriture automatique, 1920

<3>

As early as 1919, the French writers André Breton and Philippe Soupault composed the first surrealist text in the history of literature: *Les Champs magnétiques*. This was the actual beginning of the Surrealist movement. Using automatic writing and drawing: they wrote the chapters alternately.² For Breton the automatic drawings of Masson were of great significance at that time. In an article of 1941, he expressed himself about *Genesis und künstlerische Perspektiven des Surrealismus* (*Genesis and artistic perspectives of Surrealism*) as follows:

»From the beginning of the surrealist movement [...] André Masson came upon automatism at the very beginning of his artistic career. The hand of the artist [...] is not the same one that slavishly retraced the shape of objects; rather it is in love with its own movement, and only in that, now describing the involuntary emerging forms which, experience teaches, are destined to take real shape. The significant discovery is, in fact, that the pen when writing or the pencil when drawing runs over the paper free of deliberate intent, so weaving a very precious substance.«³



Abb. 5: André Masson, Automatic Drawing, 1925/26 © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015



Abb. 6: André Masson, Battle of fishes, 1926 © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015

<4>

Graphical automatism which Masson created by analogy to the *écriture automatique* remains according to the critics strongly impacted by the restraining role, which distinguished the technical version of painting. Terms as structuring of the spontaneity are unknown.

On further study it becomes apparent that behind the *écriture automatique* of Breton and Soupault's *Les Champs magnétiques* are hidden processing and accurate construction.

Both use different tempo limits their processes, increases as well as reductions in tempo. In the sand pictures of 1926/27, Masson succeeded in applying a method based on chance and intuition. He transmitted the >energetic line< into painting. Masson said about his sand pictures: »Onto patches of adhesive, cursorily thrown, sand was scattered. This was the first step towards pure movement. The aim was to revive the completely mute material [...] through the gesture.«⁴

The images would be worked with knife or comb and expanded along a spontaneous line by a direct application of color from the tube. Pollock was fascinated by the surrealist idea of a spontaneous automatic transfer of internal feelings although these compositions are in a way purely arbitrary but also reveal a certain amount of reflection and artistic strategy. The automatism of surrealism offered Pollock an opportunity to depict the conscious negation of figuration and object. As early as 1959 William Rubin showed surprising parallels in a comparison between Pollock and Masson.⁵ Pollock himself never spoke about the influence of Masson, although his works were also known from exhibitions and images in American magazines.⁶

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Robert Motherwell was also fascinated by the idea of automatism and used its stylistic vocabulary. Motherwell suggested that Abstract Expressionism should have been called Abstract Surrealism.⁷ Motherwell's drawings from Mexico in 1943 referred to similar earlier works of Matta.



Abb. 7: Robert Motherwell, The Door, 1943 © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015

Abb. 8: Roberto Matta, El día es un atentado, 1942 © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015

Motherwell's work *Automatic Drawing No. II* from 1941 is the result of being confronted with the chaotically arranged circles and lines of Matta in which he demonstrates the ideas of automatic working. Motherwell's contact with the surrealists centered around two figures, Matta and Wolfgang Paalen. Motherwell met Matta at Seligmann's studio in February of 1941, and was soon visiting him several times per week.

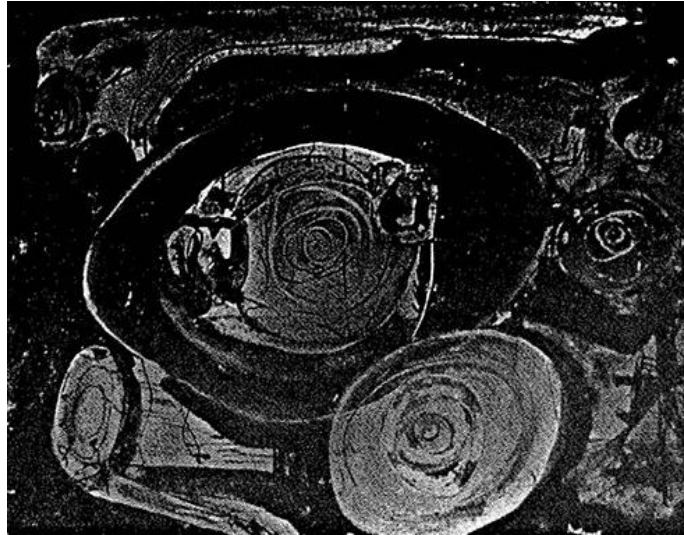


Abb. 9: Robert Motherwell, Automatic Drawing II, 1941 © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015

<6>

In June of 1941 Matta, Motherwell, and Barbara Reis traveled to Mexico. Motherwell and Matta remained in the mountainous artist's colony of Taxco until August.⁸

In a 1975 interview Masson commented on the influence of the surrealist artists on American Abstract Art:

»It cannot be ruled out that the arrival of the surrealists in America represented the trigger (for Abstract Expressionism). Influences are often work in an indirect way. If I, as I have been told and written to frequently, have exerted some influence on recent American painting, because I, without being an Impressionist, have applied the paint much like the Impressionists did. (My) pictures (...) show a tremendous fascination with color, with the blob of color, that cannot have escaped either Pollock or de Kooning. (...) and the young American painters of this time (...) have understood that form no longer had the same power as before, and that color is more appropriate in our time to express our deep feelings.«⁹



Abb. 10: André Masson, Germination nocturne, 1955 © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015

The influence Masson talked about is undisputed. The impulses from surrealist art and from the artists themselves were of enormous relevance to the development of Abstract Expressionism.¹⁰ In the case of Masson the influences were highly reciprocal. Masson described his exile in the United States as a pivotal point for his creativity: »(...) In America, things concentrated for me, it is where I went the furthest, where I matured.«¹¹

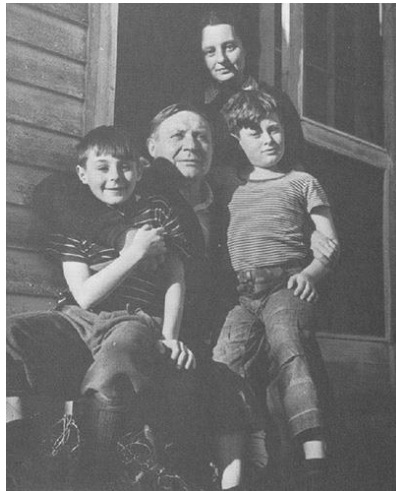


Abb. 11: Diego, André, Rose, and Luis Masson in New Preston, Connecticut

<7>

Masson came to the United States in June 1941, living first with his family in Washington and later on a farm in New Preston, Connecticut. During his exile Masson was extremely productive. Between 1941 and 1945 he created more than 100 paintings, 50 graphic works and about one dozen sculptures, together with a large number of drawings, watercolors and pastels.¹² Masson worked tirelessly to convey contemporary French art and culture to America. On the occasion of his first exhibition in October 1941 at the Baltimore Museum of Art, he gave a lecture about: *Origines du cubisme et du surréalisme*. Between 1942 and 1945 Masson had numerous solo and group exhibitions in New York, among other things in the Buchholz Gallery and in Peggy Guggenheim's Gallery *Art of this Century*.

<8>

Peggy Guggenheim's Gallery *Art of this Century* was opened in October 1942 and for New York artists it was a sensation. The exhibition designed by Frederick Kiesler contained works by André Masson, Hans Arp, Constantin Brancusi, Marc Chagall, Salvador Dalí, Giorgio de Chirico, Robert Delaunay, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst and Piet Mondrian. At the opening Peggy Guggenheim divided the collection into a surrealist and an abstract group.



Abb. 12: Émigrés in Peggy Guggenheim's New York apartment, 1942

<9>

Also deserving of special mention is the exhibition *Artists of Exile* at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in March 1942, which included a majority of surrealist works. Among those exhibiting were Masson, Roberto Matta, Yves Tanguy, André Breton and Kurt Seligman. In autumn 1942, Marcel Duchamp together with André Breton organized the exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism* in Madison Avenue, New York. Duchamp had arrived in New York just a few months before, in June 1942. Around him and André Breton as founding figures the surrealist artists who were working in their New York exile came together.¹³ The exhibition also included American artists: William Baziotes, Alexander Calder, John Goodwin, David Hare, Robert Motherwell, Ralph Nelson, Barbara Reis, Kay Sage and Eugene Lawrence Vail. Jackson Pollock was asked to participate but he refused, saying as his reason that such a statement of herd mentality was not his cup of tea.¹⁴



Abb. 13: Artists in Exile, photograph for the announcement of the *Artists of Exile* exhibition at the Pierre Matisse Gallery, March 1942

<10>

Through these exhibitions a rapprochement took place between Surrealism and the American artists. On the one hand Surrealism was attractive because of its aesthetically political solutions, and on the other hand threatening due to its authority and historical prestige. In an earlier issue of *Art Front*, Jerome Kline had condemned the artists of Dada and Surrealism, saying that they were »neurotically incapable of giving their efforts a point of leverage in the real world, having dodged the vital issues of revolutionary art.«¹⁵ Despite these reservations the reputation of Surrealism attracted American artists. The magazine *VVV*, founded in June 1942, played an important role in the dissemination of the Surrealism in the United States. Here André Breton published his *Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Else*. The magazine *Surrealism*, published by Charles Henri Ford with contributions by André Breton, Max Ernst, Benjamin Péret, Kurt Seligmann and of course André Masson, should also be mentioned when talking about the dissemination of surrealist ideas.¹⁶

<11>

In New York, the Atelier 17 of Stanley William Hayter became an important connection point between the surrealists and American abstract artists. Hayter was an English painter and graphic artist who had lived in Paris since 1926. He had originally learned printmaking from a Polish master of the burin, Joseph Hecht, but by the early 1930's he had started to develop some of the mediums's automatist possibilities, rubbing over engraved lines with coarse carborundum or using a burnisher to blur figure-ground distinctions.¹⁷ In the years 1934–40 Hayter joined the surrealist group and ran a famous studio for graphic reproduction at No.17, Rue Campagne-Première in Paris. From 1940 until 1950 Hayter was in exile in New York. In direct neighborhood to Pollock, he founded a graphic studio (Atelier 17) which would be a meeting point for the European artists in exile, and within in a short time also welcomed the local avant-garde. Jacob Kainen, the American painter and printmaker who also worked in Atelier 17, described the atmosphere there as follows: »Everyone at the studio was on his own. Hayter would tell them to ruin the plate. He urged them to start without sketches, take proofs, re-etch, add drypoint, do everything. The idea was to make the artist lose his fear of the plate and also to make it an intuitive process. I think it had a lot to do with the development of the automatic point of view.«¹⁸

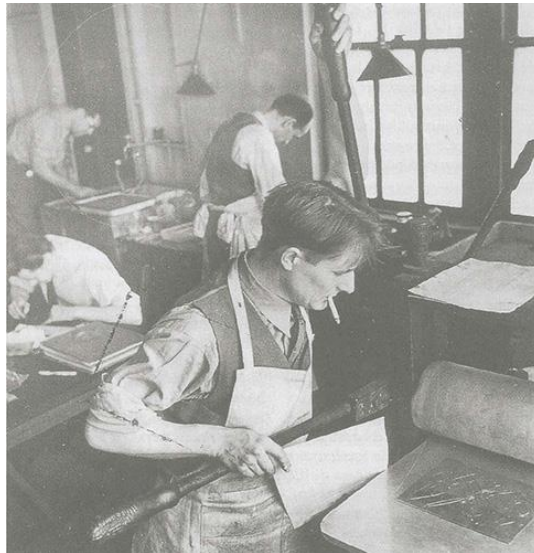


Abb. 14: Atelier 17 (Hayter)

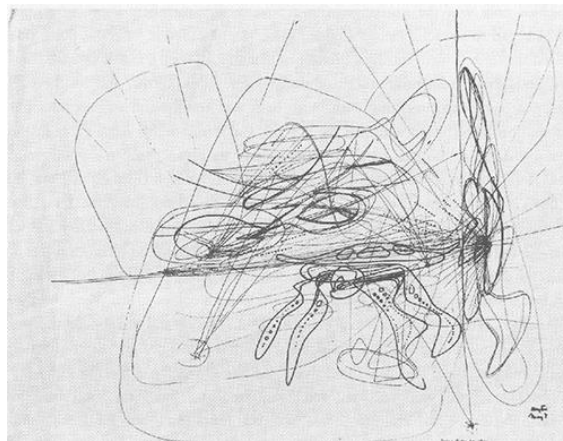


Abb. 15: Stanley William Hayter, Untitled drawing, c. 1942, present whereabouts unknown © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015

<12>

After 1941 Masson printed the majority of his plates in Hayter's Atelier.¹⁹ It can be assumed that Pollock knew about the works which were produced there, because he had extensive opportunities to make the acquaintance of the European artists in exile and to exchange ideas.²⁰ Martica Sawin even states in her book *Surrealism in Exile and the beginning of the New York School* in 1995 that Pollock worked on at least seven plates there in the winter of 1944-1945.²¹ A proof of Masson's print *Abduction (Rapt)*, with its image reduced to lines running wildly over the entire surface, hung in the studio and would have been seen by Pollock.²² Bernice Rose is convinced that Hayter had shown Pollock the work *Rapt* as an example of an automatic drawing. It is similar to the line used by Masson in *Abduction (Rapt)*. The print offers a striking contrast with Pollock's rape paintings and drawings of the early 1930s in the use of line, not to define contour, but to indicate direction and unleashed energy.²³

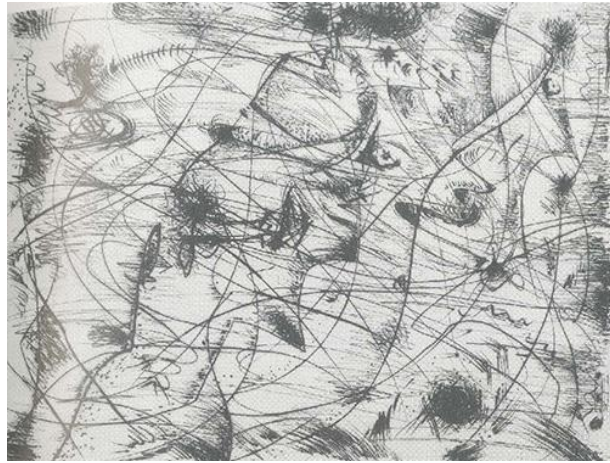


Abb. 16: André Masson, Abduction (Rapt), 1942, printed 1958,
drypoint © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015



Abb. 17: Jackson Pollock, Untitled (7), 1945, printed 1967, engraving and drypoint
Printed in brown black © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015

<13>

The surrealist tradition of automatism played an important role not only for Jackson Pollock, but also for Cy Twombly, whose figurative indications of signs call to mind the works of Masson. Twombly achieved the synthesis of Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism.²⁴



Abb. 18: Cy Twombly, Untitled, 1954

In the middle of the 1950's Twombly produced a group of six or eight works which feature white chalk markings on a dark canvas.²⁵ The largest and only surviving work is *Panorama*, from 1955.²⁶ The other works in this series were probably destroyed shortly after their completion, but photographs of them exist.²⁷ These works on canvas are distinguished from Twombly's earliest works on paper especially by the consistent distribution of the marking, which is why the works are often referred to as *all over paintings*.²⁸

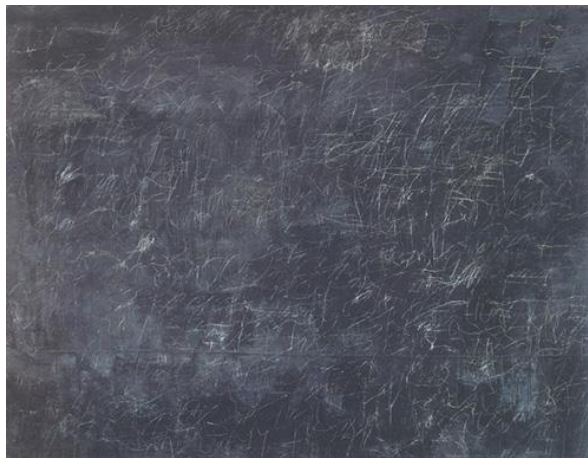


Abb. 19: Cy Twombly, Panorama 1955



Abb. 20: Jackson Pollock, Cathedral 1947 © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015

The works around *Panorama* show the influence of Pollock's *action paintings*.

The movement displayed in the *Panorama* group is also present in Twombly's later works. However Twombly's works clearly appear the finer in comparison to Pollock's work. Twombly used thin markings instead of working with wild flecks of color.²⁹ He also used *abstractly-expressing markings* over the whole canvas, which was painted at a fast, rhythmic pace, with the artist often going beyond the edge of the canvas.³⁰ The large format of the painting and at the same time the vertical nature of the process allowed a *new liberty of the painting gestus* in which the line not only comes from the wrist but also demands a movement of the whole torso, that is reflected in the painting.³¹ It can be seen from this early example that the physical movement of the artist and the rhythm in which the strokes are applied is an important theme. The movement seems released from inside the artist. External influences and images were barely or not at all considered. The motions of drawing came spontaneously, almost automatically, powered by feelings³². Inwardly moving themes can be released and restrained with the help of the hand and body. As with Pollock's *action paintings*, speed and body movement came to the fore.

<14>

Finally I would like to come back to the drawings of Masson. His works too show uncontrolled increases in and loss of tempo, as the pages of *Les Champs magnétiques* of Soupault and Breton show. In the works of Masson the hand moves freely over the paper. At the beginning it works in the middle of the drawing paper, then the drawing extends to the edges. Sometimes Masson sticks a smaller piece of paper to the drawing paper, to allow him to continue the impulse which the drawing follows. Out of the network of lines gradually appears a motif. These include parts of objects or anatomical fragments. The

network of lines seems somewhat hectic and staccato-like. In the automatic drawings of Masson the concrete object is avoided. However there are sometimes associations to forms and figurative objects.³³ Because of the infinite movement in Masson's way of painting the content was not dogmatically prescribed.³⁴

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Abb. 2 Jackson Pollock, Echo (Number 25), 1951 (Regine Prange, Jackson Pollock Number 32, 1950. Die Malerei als Gegenwart, Frankfurt am Main, 1996).

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Abb. 5 André Masson, Automatic drawing, 1925/26, Ink on paper, Centre George Pompidou Paris (Regine Prange, Jackson Pollock Number 32, 1950. Die Malerei als Gegenwart, Frankfurt am Main, 1996).

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Abb. 7 Robert Motherwell, The Door, 1943 (Siri Engberg und Joan Banach, The Complete Prints 1940-1991 Catalogue Raisonné, New York 2003).

Abb. 8 Roberto Matta, El día es un atentado, 1942
(<http://www.ugr.es/~histarte/investigacion/grupo/proyecto/pintxx/pages/Roberto%20Matta.%20El%20d%EDa%20es%20un%20atentado,%201942.htm>, 10.03.2015).

Abb. 9 Robert Motherwell, Automatic Drawing II, 1941 (Siri Engberg und Joan Banach, The Complete Prints 1940-1991 Catalogue Raisonné, New York 2003).

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Abb. 14 Stanley William Hayter at Atelier 17, New York, ca. 1943. ((Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*, Cambridge (Mass.), London 1995).

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Abb. 16 André Masson, *Abduction (Rapt)*, 1942, printed 1958, drypoint, 12 1/8 x 15 15/16 inches, anonymous extended loan to The Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*, Cambridge (Mass.), London 1995, S. 371).

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Abb. 18 Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1954, Augusta, Georgia, Pencil, 19 x 25 inches, Collection the Artist. (Nicola del Roscio, *Cy Twombly Drawings*, Cat. Rais. Vol. 1, 1951-1955, S. 88).

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Zur Autorin

KARIN WIMMER, Dr. phil., Scientific Assistant at the Kunstgeschichtliches Institut of the Ludwigs-Maximilians-Universität München, Studied Art History at Vienna and Siena, 2004 and 2006. Research Fellowships at Rome and Florence. Doctoral Dissertation 2011, topic: Surreale Räume: Die räumliche Unordnung in den Werken Giorgio de Chiricos in den Jahren 1909 bis 1915. Research activities: Surrealism, Surrealism's influences, Exile, Theories about Space, Complex Spatial Problems in the 20th century, Land Art, Minimal Art. Publications: Giorgio de Chirico. Der Künstler zwischen Traum und Wirklichkeit, in: Kuckuck. Notizen zur Alltagskultur, Bd. 25, 2010, H. 1; Der surreale Raum: Giorgio de Chirico in Paris, in: Großstadt. Motor der Künste in der Moderne, hg. v. Burcu Dogramaci, Berlin 2010, Netzwerke des Exils. Künstlerische Verflechtungen, Austausch und Patronage nach 1933 (Hg. mit Burcu Dogramaci), Berlin 2011, Surrealismus und Exil: Max Ernst in New York, in: Netzwerke des Exils, Hg. Burcu Dogramaci und Karin Wimmer, Berlin 2011, S. 375 – 395. Friedrich Nietzsche und Giorgio de Chirico. Das Raumverständnis de Chiricos in den Jahren 1909-1915, in: »Einige werden posthum geboren«: Friedrich Nietzsches Wirkungen (Nietzsche Heute), Renate Reschke und Marco Brusotti (Hg.), Berlin/Boston 2012, S. 263-279, De Chirico. Surreale Räume. Diss. Universität Wien, April 2015.

Kontakt: Karin.wimmer@kunstgeschichte.uni-muenchen.de
Zentnerstrasse 31, 80799 München

¹ In detail to Jackson Pollock and his painting, see Regine Prange, Jackson Pollock Number 32, 1950. Die Malerei als Gegenwart, Frankfurt am Main, 1996.

² André Breton und Philippe Soupault (Hg.), Les champs magnétiques, Paris 1920.

³ André Breton, Genesis und künstlerische Perspektiven des Surrealismus, p. 70, in: André Breton, Der Surrealismus und die Malerei, 1967, p. 55-88.

⁴ See André Masson in: Propos sur le surréalisme (1961), in: André Masson, Le rebelle du surréalisme, in the place indicated, p. 37.

⁵ See William Rubin, Notes on Masson and Pollock. The rapport between the two artist's work are here examined in terms of critical analysis rather than of polemics, in: Arts Magazine, vol. 34, November 1959, p. 36-49.

⁶ See Karin Sagner, Impulse – André Masson und Jackson Pollock, in: André Masson. Gesammelte Schriften, volume 2, edited of Barbara Sietz, Berlin 2005, p. 51-56, especially p. 53.

⁷ Ibidem, Note 6, p. 54.

⁸ See also Robert Saltonstall: Robert Motherwell. The formative years, Ann Arbor 1986, p. 25.

⁹ See also André Masson in an interview from 1975, Alice Rewald recorded Interview, in: André Masson, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, Munich 1990, p. 282-283.

¹⁰ See also: Martica Sawin: *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*, Cambridge (Mass.), London 1995.

¹¹ Tape recordings published by Gilbert Brownstone, Paris 1975, p. 130, and Gilbert Brownstone, *My idea of America*, in: *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, volume 13, no. 4-5, 1946, p. 3-5.

¹² See Doris A. Birmingham: *André Masson in America: The Artist's Achievement in Exile, 1941-1945*, Diss. Universität of Michigan, Ann Arbor 1976, p. 40.

¹³ See Robert Lebel: *Duchamp. Von der Erscheinung zur Konzeption*, Köln 1972, p. 90.

¹⁴ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*, Cambridge (Mass.), London 1995, p. 230.

¹⁵ Jerome Kline, *Art Front New York*, Nr. 3 February 1935, p. 7, cited by Sawin 1995 (Note 10), p. 93.

¹⁶ See Schneede 2006, p. 231.

¹⁷ See Sawin 1995 (Note 10), p. 153.

¹⁸ Jacob Kainen, Interview with Avis Berman, August 10, 1982, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, cited by Sawin 1995 (Note 10), p. 154.

¹⁹ With a small number of exceptions, this shortly resulted after their arrival by Seligman. See also Karin Sagner, Note 6, p. 55, Footnote 23. Sawin has written, that Masson did eighteen prints at Atelier 17 during his years in the United States, starting late in 1941 with *Emblème*, an original print produced for inclusion in the deluxe copies of his *Mythology of Being* which Wittenborn published in early 1942, see Sawin 1995, p. 154.

²⁰ See Bernice Rose, *Jackson Pollock: Works on Paper*, New York 1969, p. 18.

²¹ Sawin 1995 (Note 10), p. 154.

²² See Sawin 1995 (Note 10), p. 371, see also Bernice Rose, *Jackson Pollock: Works on Paper*, New York 1969, p. 18. See also Jackson Pollock, *drawing into painting*, New York 1980, p. 21-22.

²³ Sawin 1995 (Note 10), p. 371.

²⁴ Richard Leeman, *Cy Twombly. Malen, Zeichnen, Schreiben*, München 2005, p. 31.

²⁵ Kirk Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: Eine Retrospektive*, 1994, p. 21 to the date and number of the images.

²⁶ Probably *Panorama* was completed 1954, see also Varnedoe 1994, Note 25, p. 22.

²⁷ Hochdörfer 2009, *Cy Twombly - States of Mind: Malerei, Skulptur, Photographie, Zeichnung*, Wien 2009, p. 27; Varnedoe 1994, Note 27, p. 21.

²⁸ Hochdörfer 2009, Note 27, p. 27; Jutta Göricke, *Cy Twombly, Spurensuche*, München 1994, p. 40 and Leeman 2005, Note 24, p.31. All use the term all over painting.

²⁹ Göricke 1994, Note 28, p. 41.

³⁰ Hochdörfer 2009, Note 27, p. 27.

³¹ Leeman 2005, Note 24, p. 31.

³² Göricke 1994, Note 28, p. 141.

³³ See Spies, Werner, *André Masson. Eine Mythologie der Natur*, Künzelsau 2004, p. 13, 14.

³⁴ See Dieter Rahn, *Raumdarstellung und Zeitbezug in der Malerei. Zur Kunst und Kunstgeschichte André Massons*, Mittenwald, 1982, p. 204.